

U.S. Embassy Kinshasa

The American Cultural Center

A NEW BEGINNING: Engaging the Muslim World



"I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and the Muslim world based upon mutual interest and mutual respect – based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition," President Obama said at Cairo University on Thursday, June 4. His historic speech was the first part of a conversation between not only Americans and Muslims, but people all over the world. Embassy Kinshasa held several events to provide access to President Obama's speech and promote the lively conversation that followed. This irregular issue of our newsletter is devoted in its entirety to the speech and the reactions it provoked in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Speech Sparks Lively Debate Among Local Audiences

On Tuesday June 4, more than thirty journalists watched a live broadcast of the President's speech (simultaneously translated into French by France 24 news channel) in the American Cultural Center. Also in attendance were Political Counselor Phil Nelson, PAO Katya Thomas, APAO Stephen Weeks and Fulbright professor of political science Patrick Cannon. The journalists listened attentively to the President's speech, and there was even applause at the end. During the Q&A session that followed, the journalists expressed their appreciation of the speech and wondered what direct impact a "New Beginning" between the U.S. and the Muslim world would have on the DRC.

One journalist noted the President's discussion of democracy, and stated that elections alone do not make a democracy (especially if they are not free and fair). A female Muslim journalist said that while she appreciated the sentiments expressed in the President's speech, she hoped that Americans "would understand if [Muslims] are a bit skeptical" about what actions might follow these words. Another journalist admired the President's self confidence and the respect he commanded. "No one is going to throw a shoe at this president," the journalist remarked. A second event was a rebroadcast of the President's speech, attended by twenty-five opinion leaders, many of them Muslim. Deputy Chief of Mission Samuel Brock chaired an animated discussion that raised many important and deeply felt concerns shared between leaders of the Muslim community in the DRC.



DRC Media Reaction — Support and Skepticism

Local media reaction to President Obama's Cairo speech expressed appreciation of the speech, support for the goal of refreshed understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world, and wariness, sometimes bordering on skepticism, about how much will actually change. These reactions were similar to global commentary following the speech.

Here are a few excerpts from the local press.

Le Phare: "The U.S. President apparently broke the ice between America and the Muslim world."

Le Potentiel: "Obama clearly wants to end the tumultuous relationship with the Muslim world initiated by his predecessor. He is right to accuse Muslim extremists of attempting to radicalize Muslim countries. But he did not indicate how he would end suspicions and mistrust between the U.S. and Muslims across the world."

L'Avenir: "DRC Muslims are weary of the association made between Islam and terrorism... They want to see President Obama's words translated into concrete action."

RAGA TV: "It is basically a wait-and-see situation as many wonder whether the U.S. President can deliver."

Numerica TV: "Obama must definitely prove his mettle."

Roundtable Discussion Among Congolese

On June 10, nearly a week after President Obama's speech, PAS Kinshasa held a roundtable discussion concerning the issues it raised in the DRC. The panel included members of the journalism, political and academic communities. The setting was intimate, and the conversation was wide-ranging. In general, the panelists all agreed that the speech had a large and positive impact on the Congolese people. Now everyone is waiting to see what substantive changes result, and whether President Obama's visit to Ghana will be the occasion for an equally historic speech concerning Africa. Here are some excerpts from the panelists' comments:

"Africans can feel sympathy for the Muslims because they, too, have suffered from a colonial heritage. We hope that when Obama comes to Africa, he will bring a similar message of peace, tolerance, and justice."

"My friends and I saw the speech as a rupture, but as we say here, a positive rupture, breaking away from something bad and toward something good. The U.S. is more than a nation. It is a notion, an idea that is in everybody's head. Obama is getting people to redefine that notion."

"Obama is one out of many — different races, different religions. The best civilizations are diverse. In Europe you can go from Cyprus to Gibraltar on one passport. In Africa, we are still divided by borders and face border conflicts."

"What interested me was what he said about women's rights. He wants to empower women by giving them access to education and work. He worries about pornography and vulgarity on the internet. When he spoke about the struggle for women's rights, he said that struggle was still going on in the U.S. As an African woman, I hope that equality will happen quickly. Violence against women is a problem for everybody, not just the Muslim world."

"Previous U.S. presidents gave speeches that were one-sided, focused on protecting the U.S. against its enemies. But the more you try to protect yourself, the more threatened you become. Obama is the first president to give a balanced speech. If the extremists continue with a biased discourse, they will appear more and more marginalized."

"When the world hears 'Congo' it should mean coming together. That's our destiny."

The Conversation Continues...

"A New Beginning" is not the final word, but the start of a conversation involving people of all faiths and nationalities. Here are a list of websites where you can make your own voice heard:

- Obama Today Blog: <http://blogs.america.gov/obama>
 - White House Facebook Page: <http://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse>
 - White House MySpace page: <http://www.myspace.com/whitehouse>
 - Video of Cairo Speech: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/NewBeginning/>
 - America.gov page (translations, comments, updates, and related materials): http://www.america.gov/obama_cairo.html
 - Photos of speech: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/sets/72157619236941452/>
-